

June 16, 1964

William Taylor, General Counsel
U. S. Civil Rights Commission
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Taylor:

At 4 a.m. this morning the predominantly Negro Catholic church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was burned. Unknown persons crawled beneath the frame recreation hall behind the church building and set the fire there. The priest, Father John C. Kersten, at the church, the Holy Rosary Catholic Mission, 902 Dabbs Street, was out of town. The fire destroyed the inside of the structure but was extinguished by firemen before the roof was destroyed. However, the cross on top of the recreation hall's roof was burned. Apparently, someone crawled to the top of the roof and poured kerosene and tar on the cross and lit it in a second fire. The flames from the recreation hall also burned the back of the church. The window fans were stolen from the recreation hall.

Msgr. John T. Martin is the priest at the all-white Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

The Holy Rosary Catholic Mission has been used for voter registration mass meetings for the area. Also Negro business leaders have met there privately to discuss this situation and present requests to the mayor and other officials. A meeting was held at the church last night, which ended at about 11 p.m.

Hattiesburg has been the scene of an intensified voter registration program directed by SNCC since January 22, 1964, "Freedom Day". By mid-May over 850 Negroes has sought to register, though only 145 actually were registered. In the county, which is 28 percent Negro, there are 7,406 voting-age Negroes of whom only 53 were registered when the vote drive began. The Justice Department has had an injunction against the county registrar, Theron Lynd, since April 1962. This injunction orders him to stop discriminating against Negro applicants. Lynd was also convicted of civil contempt in July 1963 for his failure to register Negroes. However, he has not yet complied with the injunction or purged himself of contempt.

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Hattiesburg has also been the home and campaign headquarters of Rev. John Cameron and Mrs. Victoria Gray, Negro candidates for Congress in the June 2 primary.

We urge the Civil Rights Commission to investigate the church burning. In one week, close to a thousand students and other volunteers will begin to arrive in Mississippi as the summer project begins. The burning represents an awesome prelude to reaction to this project.

Sincerely,

John Lewis

John Lewis,
Chairman

JL:jd